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ABSTRACT

Little research has been done on attitudes toward and levels of support for nontraditional academic programs in higher education. A research project was conducted involving students, faculty, professional staff, and administrators at three institutions of varying size, location, and academic program: The University of Massachusetts at Amherst; Southern Methodist University; and Staten Island Community College. The purpose of the study was to determine the subjects' attitudes toward nontraditional academic programs and then compare response across the various constituencies. It was hypothesized that tenured faculty would prove to be the least supportive of nontraditional studies. The data supported this hypothesis. (Author/JMF)

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Attitudes Toward
Nontraditional Academic Programs

by

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Introductory Footnote

Dr. Dan Flanagan is currently Dean of Students at Kansas Wesleyan. Research assistance was also provided by Steve Zwerling, director of Circle 73 at Staten Island Community College, and by various members of the Program Council of Southern Methodist University.

Attitudes Toward Nontraditional Academic Programs

INTRODUCTION

The future of nontraditional academic programs depends, in part, on the receptiveness of the various college constituencies toward nontraditional learning. Even more important is the attitude of decision-makers toward nontraditional studies.

A review of the literature indicates that educational researchers have made little effort to determine attitudes toward innovation in higher education or to analyze the relationship of attitudes toward and support for nontraditional programs. Warren Bryan Martin (1973) surveyed top academic administrators at colleges and universities in California concluding that crucial leadership was available from top administrators for effecting change in institutions of higher education. Similar research has not been published for institutions outside California nor for constituencies other than administrators.

The purpose of this paper is to report and analyze the results of a research project on attitudes toward nontraditional academic programs which involved three major institutions of higher education. The research included all constituencies of each institution: administration, students, faculty, and professional staff. It was hypothesized that tenured faculty as a group would prove to be the least supportive of nontraditional academic programs.

METHOD

During the spring semester of 1976 a survey was sent to a random sampling of students, faculty, administrators, and professional staff at three institutions: The University of Massachusetts at Amherst; Southern Methodist University; and Staten Island Community College. The survey contained a number of questions designed to determine the respondents' attitudes toward nontraditional programs and the kind of support ~~the~~ EACH respondent was likely to give such programs. Nontraditional academic programs were defined as those programs granting academic credit outside the usual channels of departmental structures.

The total sample of 307 subjects included 168 students, 107 faculty, and 32 administration/professional staff. Broken down by institution, the sample included 168 from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, 60 from Southern Methodist University, and 79 from Staten Island Community College. Table 1 provides a more complete breakdown of the subjects. The sample represented approximately one percent of the populations of each campus with a thirty percent rate of return. Analysis of Variance and Duncan's Multiple Range Test were used in analysis of the data.

Insert Table 1 About Here

TABLE 1: RESPONDENT BREAKDOWN

INSTITUTION	FACULTY				STUDENT		Professional staff/
	Instructor	Assistant	Associate	Full	Undergraduate	Graduate	Administration
ALL	13 (4.2)*	33 (10.7)	24 (7.8)	37 (12.1)	153 (49.8)	15 (4.9)	32 (10.5)
UMASS	4 (2.4)	15 (8.9)	17 (10.1)	24 (17.3)	72 (42.9)	9 (5.4)	22 (13.0)
SMU	4 (6.7)	10 (16.7)	7 (11.7)	8 (13.3)	16 (26.6)	6 (10.0)	9 (15.0)
SICC	5 (6.3)	8 (10.1)	-------	-------	65 (82.3)	-------	1 (1.3)

* The figures in parentheses indicate the percentage of the respondents from that institution.

RESULTS

Satisfaction Levels

Respondents were asked to indicate their satisfaction with nontraditional academic programs on their campus. The response scale was from one to five, one being "very satisfied" and five being "very dissatisfied." A significant difference to the .001 level was found in satisfaction levels by group. Those expressing the greatest satisfaction were students and nontenured faculty while associate and full professors indicated the greatest amount of dissatisfaction. Table 2 represents in more detail the various levels of satisfaction with nontraditional academic programs.

Insert Table 2 About Here

There existed also a significant positive correlation ($p < .001$) between the level of satisfaction and the kinds of changes respondents suggested ought to occur in current nontraditional academic programs. Associate and full professors tended to suggest abolishing nontraditional programs, integrating them into the departmental structure, or creating greater structure and accountability in nontraditional programs. The groups indicating the highest levels of satisfaction tended to suggest nurturing the nontraditional programs in some way, i.e., increasing their operational budgets and/or facilitating greater campus participation in such programs. Many of the respondents were not participants in

TABLE 2: SATISFACTION LEVELS

INSTITUTION	FACULTY				STUDENTS			
	Instructor	Assistant	Associate	Full	Undergraduate	Graduate	Staff	Administration
ALL	2.3636*	2.7500	3.0500	3.4848	2.2993	2.6667	2.7778	2.6667
UMASS	2.3333	2.6424	3.0714	3.5185	2.3284	2.2000	2.6471	2.6667
SMU	4.3333	3.5714	3.0000	3.3333	2.9286	3.2500	3.0000	------
SICC	1.2000	2.1429	------	------	2.1071	------	3.0000	------

* Values represent the mean or average group score on a five point scale.

nontraditional studies (54.4%). A person's participation in nontraditional programs had a significant positive correlation with higher levels of satisfaction ($p < .001$).

Both advising of students and perceptions of the way decision-makers treat nontraditional programs relative to traditional programs were related significantly to satisfaction levels. When asked if they would advise students to participate in a nontraditional program, respondents indicating the greatest level of dissatisfaction with nontraditional programs were less likely than those satisfied with nontraditional studies to advise a student to participate in such programs. The difference between the response of those satisfied and those dissatisfied was statistically significant to the .001 level.

On most campuses faculty have the major responsibility for decisions relating to nontraditional education. Respondents were asked if decision-makers treated nontraditional and traditional programs equally. There was a significant difference by satisfaction level ($p < .001$) concerning perceptions of the way decision-makers treated traditional and nontraditional academic programs. Persons indicating the highest levels of satisfaction tended to believe traditional and nontraditional academic programs were treated <u>equally</u>. Those most dissatisfied with nontraditional programs tended to view treatment by decision-makers as being <u>unequal</u>--favoritism given to nontraditional programs. Since faculty committees rendering academic decisions are generally composed

of tenured faculty, and tenured faculty expressed the greatest level of dissatisfaction with nontraditional programs, these data indicate that tenured faculty do not perceive themselves as influencial in decisions regarding nontraditional academic programs.

Students and Nontraditional Studies

Respondents were asked--Do you believe nontraditional programs: (1) meet the needs of a large number of students; (2) meet the needs of some students; (3) are unnecessary since student needs can be met by existing departments; or (4) should not be evaluated on the basis of student need? Responses by level of satisfaction were significantly different ($p<.001$). A higher level of satisfaction with nontraditional programs meant the respondent was more likely to see a greater number of students served by nontraditional programs. A lower level of satisfaction usually meant a response reflecting the feeling that nontraditional programs were not necessary to meet student needs. Those who suggested student needs were being met by academic departments were also likely to be dissatisfied with nontraditional learning.

When asked if nontraditional programs had a positive effect on student learning experiences, those most satisfied with nontraditional programs were most likely to respond "yes" while those most dissatisfied were most likely to respond "no"--the responses differing significantly by satisfaction level ($p<.001$). The same trend occurred when respondents were asked if they believed students who participated in nontraditional academic

programs viewed their own involvement as a positive experience. As those dissatisfied with nontraditional studies could not view the programs having a positive effect on student learning, they also did not believe students considered their own involvement in nontraditional programs to be positive.

A majority of the respondents perceived significant differences between the characteristics of students in traditional and students in nontraditional programs. Again, there existed a statistically significant difference in response by satisfaction level ($p<.001$). Those most satisfied with nontraditional programs were more likely to perceive a difference in the two groups of students and were more likely to describe students in nontraditional programs in a more positive way than respondents dissatisfied with nontraditional programs. If the respondent saw significant differences in student characteristics, the students in nontraditional academic programs were almost always described as more self-directed, more highly motivated, more creative, and more open-minded than students in traditional departmental programs.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

In this survey the level of satisfaction or general attitude toward nontraditional academic programs was related to other perceptions of nontraditional programs. Levels of satisfaction varied significantly among the constituencies on the college

campuses surveyed. The level of faculty satisfaction with nontraditional programs decreased as rank and tenure increased. The potential leadership for effecting change in institutions of higher education, on the basis of this survey, rests more with nontenured faculty, students and administration/staff than with tenured faculty or graduate students. Conversely, the research hypothesis was supported: tenured faculty proved to be the least supportive of nontraditional academic programs.

Respondents tended to project their own feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with nontraditional programs onto others. If dissatisfied with nontraditional learning, respondents: (1) were likely to suggest that students were unhappy with their experience in nontraditional programs; (2) probably believed decision-makers treated traditional and nontraditional programs unequally; and (3) tended to believe that potential employers viewed nontraditional academic programs with skepticism. Generally, these respondents tended to be tenured faculty. Nontenured faculty, students and professional staff/administration reported a significantly higher level of satisfaction with nontraditional programs than did tenured faculty. Nontenured faculty, students and professional staff/administration also tended to suggest that students were satisfied with their learning experiences in nontraditional programs and that neither decision-makers nor potential employers frowned upon nontraditional programs relative to traditional academic programs.

If, indeed, academic policy decisions rest largely with faculty committees--committees which usually use tenure as one criteria for membership--the future of nontraditional academic programs may be a difficult one. Leadership potential for developing alternative academic programs seems to be wide spread, but relatively small in crucial constituencies--constituencies most likely to have an impact on decisions affecting nontraditional academic programs. In this way associate and full professors may be a significant stumbling block to academic change in higher education.

Analyzing the data by institution, a slight variation appears in responses from Southern Methodist University compared to the responses of the other two institutions. The Southern Methodist University data reflect an angry and frustrated few who are supportive of nontraditional approaches to learning but are dissatisfied with their institution's level of commitment to nontraditional programming. The data from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst indicate a significantly large cadre of faculty (mostly tenured faculty) dissatisfied with what they perceive as a maze of nontraditional programs which are not held accountable, inadequately structured, and evaluated differently than more traditional departmental counterparts. Staten Island Community College, noted to be one of the most innovative of America's two year colleges, seems not to be "radical" enough in its academic programming for a large majority of those responding to this survey--

mostly students. For those supportive of nontraditional learning, the implications of this modest survey are clear: potential leadership for effecting change in institutions of higher education rests within the ranks of students, nontenured faculty, and professional staff/administration.

Suggestions for further research include: (1) increasing the number of respondents and institutions involved; and (2) to probe the relationship of attitudes toward and actual support given nontraditional academic programs. Although the numbers of respondents and institutions involved in this survey were relatively small, the institutions were quite different, all constituencies were included in the survey, and only relationships significant to the .001 were reported. The literature of social psychology would provide a basis for examining the relationship of attitudes and supportive behavior toward nontraditional academic programs.

SUMMARY

These data support Warren Bryan Martin's (1973) earlier findings that leadership for educational innovation is available from administrators, but the data also expand these earlier findings. Tenured faculty are least likely to be supportive of innovative academic programs. For persons interested in nontraditional forms of learning, these findings may be helpful in understanding the decision-making process toward academic change and in developing strategies for proposing, implementing, and supporting nontraditional learning.

Reference

Martin, Warren Bryan. How Administrators View Innovation. Change, September 1973, 5 (7), 51-52, 63.